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American education traditionally has used a "recitation script," a repeated assignment/assessment cycle. Contemporary educational reform is now emphasizing the fundamental, natural method of teaching, such as assisting learners through "instructional conversation." This method helps learners perform just beyond their current capacity. This assistance in the "zone of proximal development" awakens the mental capacities of learners of all ages. It is provided through the instructional conversation, a dialogue between the teacher and learners in which the teacher carefully listens to grasp the students' communicative intent, and tailors the dialogue to meet the emerging understanding of the learners. This pattern of relationship is appropriate for the communication of an entire school, in which teachers assist and converse with one another, administrators assist and converse with teachers, and administration provides activity settings in which these instructional conversations can occur. Contains 14 references. (Author/LB)

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THE INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATION: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOCIAL ACTIVITY

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THE INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATION:

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOCIAL ACTIVITY

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The Instructional Conversation:

Teaching and Learning in Social Activity

Abstract

For more than a century, American schooling has been conducted in much the same way: The teacher assigns a text for the students to master and then assesses their learning. Known as the "recitation script," this repeated cycle of assign-assess is far from the natural kind of teaching by which societies have been instructing their young since the dawn of time. Contemporary educational reform is now emphasizing the fundamental, natural method of teaching, which is the assisting of learners through the instructional conversation.

Newly understood through the principles of socio-historical theory, real teaching is understood as assisting the learner to perform just beyond his or her current capacity. This assistance in the "zone of proximal development" awakens and rouses to life the mental capacities of learners of all ages. This assistance is best provided through the instructional conversation, a dialogue between teacher and learners in which the teacher listens carefully to grasp the students' communicative intent, and tailors the dialogue to meet the emerging understanding of the learners.

This pattern of relationship should be characteristic of the communication of the entire school, in which teachers assist and converse with one another, administrators assist and converse with teachers, and administration provides activity settings in which these instructional conversations can occur. Such a school becomes a true community of learners, in which school reliably assists the performance of all.

Life in the 20th century has seen changes more rapid and profound than all the rest of history put together. But one thing has remained the same—school.

Before the Civil War

> Young teachers are very apt to confound rapid questioning and answers with sure and effective teaching.
>
> *(Morrison, 1860; quoted in Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969, p. 153)*

At the turn of the century

> A 1908 English visitor to American schools was struck by the ubiquity of the "time-honoured" question-answer recitation. . . . In the European schools the teacher was at the center of the learning process; he lectured, questioned the pupils, and "buil[t] up new knowledge in class." In contrast, in the American classroom, "clearly... the master is the textbook." The teacher does not really teach but "acts rather as chairman of a meeting, the object of which is to ascertain whether [the students] have studied for themselves in a textbook.
>
> *(Burstall, 1909; quoted in Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969, p. 150)*

Today

> At all grade levels the predominant method of teaching was recitation (discussion) with the teacher in control, supplementing the lesson with new information (lecturing). The key to the information and basis for reading assignments was the textbook.
>
> *(Smith, 1980; quoted in Bennett, 1986, p.27)*

"Recitation." Found everywhere in North American schools, recitation is the most frequently reported form of interactive teaching. Recitation has been described in the educational literature for over 90 years, and continues today as a major portion of all student and teacher interactions.

What is this ubiquitous recitation? It consists of the teacher assigning a text (in the form of a textbook or a lecture) followed by a series of teacher questions that require students to display their mastery of the material through convergent factual answers. Recitation questioning seeks predictable, correct answers. It includes up to 20% "yes/no" questions. Only rarely in recitation are teacher questions responsive to student productions. Only rarely are they used to assist students to develop more complete or elaborated ideas.

This dismal portrait does not describe only schools of time past, nor a few unlucky or deprived communities of the present. Goodlad (1984) reported a similar picture in his broadly based survey of 38 American schools in 13 communities and 7 regions of the United States. Teachers emphasized rote learning and immediate responses, a pattern rather like that of television game shows. Most of the time, teachers talked. Almost never were there opportunities for give-and-take between a challenging teacher and learning students. The student role was passive, and few teachers made any effort to adapt instruction to individual differences.

Even the contemporary enthusiasm for effective teaching "scripts" has not changed the nature of student-teacher interaction. Scripted teaching, which uses predesigned teacher talk and predicts student responses, offers little more than the recitation script of earlier eras. It emphasizes rote learning and student passivity, facts and low-level questions, and low-level cognitive functions. It does little to promote the intellectual development, cultural literacy, and thoughtful citizenship that *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and *America 2000* (U.S. Department of Education, 1991) have identified as crucial. Are recitation and scripted teaching the best we can do?

No, there is a better way.

A NEW DEFINITION OF TEACHING

The human sciences of the last half century have made it possible to define another kind of teaching, and how to help teachers do it. Research on teaching has been galvanized in the past few years by some seminal concepts from recently translated works of a Russian psychologist who died more than 50 years ago. L. S. Vygotsky's ideas are

profoundly affecting our understanding of teaching, learning, and cognitive development through the work of many neo-Vygotskian socio-historical theorists and researchers in various nations who now elaborate, correct, and develop this body of work (e.g., Cazden, 1981; Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch & Stone, 1985).

Much of this work has focused on the "natural teaching" of home and community. It is now clear that, long before they enter school, children are being "taught" higher order cognitive and linguistic skills. This teaching takes place in the everyday interactions of domestic life, such as doing household chores. Within the goal-directed activities of daily life, teaching consists of more capable family and friends assisting children to do things the children cannot do alone. In such teaching, the tasks themselves, not communication or thinking skills per se, are the subjects of direct instruction. Yet the pleasures of the social interaction seem sufficient to lure a child into learning the language and cognitive strategies of the caregiver as well.

Vygotsky's insights have profound implications for how we think about teaching. In his theory, the developmental level of a child is identified by what the child can do alone. What the child can do with the assistance of another defines what Vygotsky called the "zone of proximal development." Distinguishing the proximal zone from the developmental level by contrasting assisted versus unassisted performance has profound implications for educational practice. It is in the proximal zone that teaching may be defined. In Vygotskian terms, teaching is good only when it "awakens and rouses to life those functions which are in a stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1956, p. 278; quoted in Wertsch & Stone, 1985).

We can therefore derive this general definition of teaching: Teaching consists of assisting performance through a child's zone of proximal development (ZPD). *Teaching must be redefined as assisted performance; teaching occurs when performance is achieved with assistance.*

FROM NATURAL TEACHING TO INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATION

There are many ways to assist performance. Behavioral and cognitive science have studied seven means of assistance with enough breadth and for a long enough time that the effects are known and dependable:

1. Modeling: offering behavior for imitation. Modeling assists by giving the learner information and a remembered image that can serve as a performance standard.

2. Feeding back: providing information on a performance as it compares to a standard. This allows the learners to compare their performance to the standard, and thus allows self-correction.

3. Contingency managing: applying the principles of reinforcement and punishment. In this means of assisting performance, rewards and punishment are arranged to follow on behavior, depending on whether or not the behavior is desired.

4. Directing: requesting specific action. Directing assists by specifying the correct response, providing clarity and information, and promoting decision-making.

5. Questioning: producing a mental operation that the learner cannot or would not produce alone. This interaction assists further by giving the assistor information about the learner's developing understanding.

6. Explaining: providing explanatory and belief structure. This assists learners in organizing and justifying new learning and perceptions.

7. Task structuring: chunking, segregating, sequencing, or otherwise structuring a task into or from components. This modification assists by better fitting the task itself into the zone of proximal development.

Many properly conducted classroom activities provide assistance: lectures, demonstrations, cooperative learning exercises/activities, and textbook reading can all assist learning, and even recitation and assessment (used judiciously) are necessary elements of the assisting classroom. But for the development of thinking skills—the ability to form, express, and exchange ideas in speech and writ-

ing—the critical form of assisting learners is *dialogue* —the questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge that happen in conversation.

Conversation that assists performance appears in several guises. In successful students' homes, it appears as storybook reading and story telling, as helping father with the accounts or older sister with the grocery list. It is the way that parents teach their children language and letters. In the workplace or on the athletic field, it is disguised as the chatter that accompanies action. It appears as the natural conversational method of language instruction advocated by many language specialists. It can wear the mask of a third-grade reading lesson or a graduate seminar. It can be the medium for teacher training. Its generic name is the "instructional conversation."

The concept itself may be a paradox: Instruction and conversation may appear contrary, the former implying authority and planning, the latter equality and responsiveness. The task of teaching is to resolve this paradox. To truly teach, one must converse; to truly converse is to teach.

In the instructional conversation, there is a fundamentally different assumption from that of traditional recitation lessons. Parents and teachers who engage in instructional conversation are assuming that the child may have something to say beyond the known answers in the head of the adult. They occasionally extract from the child a "correct" answer, but to grasp the communicative intent of the child, adults need to listen carefully, to make guesses about the meaning of the intended communication (based on the context and on knowledge of the child's interests and experiences), and to adjust their responses to assist the child's efforts—in other words, to engage in conversation.

Of course, teachers should not act like parents in all ways. The large number of pupils, the restricted and technical curriculum, and the complexity of the institutional restraints of schooling require that teaching be highly deliberate, carefully structured, and well planned. Assisting performance through conversation requires a quite deliberate and self-controlled agenda in the mind of the teacher, who has specific curricular, cognitive, and conceptual goals. This requires highly developed professional competencies: positive and efficient classroom and behavior management, provision of effective and varied activities, orderly monitoring and assessment of progress. Even the judicious use of recitation is part of the effective teacher's armamentarium in domains where the subject matter has clear boundaries, such as spelling, phonics, multiplication tables, and the like.

So the skills of parenting are not enough to bring to the task of teaching. We are not advocating the casual spontaneous talk that is pleasant and appropriate in the home. While good instructional conversations often appear to be spontaneous, they are not—even though young students may never realize it. The instructional conversation is pointed toward a learning objective by the teacher's intention; but even the most sophisticated learners may lose consciousness of the guiding goal as they become absorbed in joint activity with the mentor.

In American schools, assisted performance through instructional conversation is rare indeed. Durkin (1978-1979) observed 18,000 minutes of reading comprehension instruction and found that less than 1% of the time was spent dealing with units of meaning larger than a word. But if we take Vygotsky's insights seriously, a major task of schooling is to create and support instructional conversations among students, teachers, administrators, program developers, and researchers. It is through the instructional conversation that babies learn to speak, children to read, teachers to teach, researchers to discover, and all to become literate. All intellectual growth relies heavily on conversation as a form of assisted performance in the zone of proximal development.

When teaching through conversation occurs, classrooms and schools are transformed into "the community of learners" that they can become "when teachers reduce the distance between themselves and their students by constructing lessons from common understandings of each others' expe-

rience and ideas" and make teaching a "warm, interpersonal and collaborative activity" (Dalton, 1989).

ACTIVITY SETTINGS FOR ASSISTING PERFORMANCE

Assistance of child learning is accomplished by creating activity settings in the classroom that maximize opportunities for coparticipation and instructional conversation with the teacher and, frequently, with peers. Although activity settings can be subject to abstract theoretical analysis, they are as homely and familiar as old shoes and the front porch. They are the social furniture of our family, community, and work lives. They are the events and people of our work and of our relations to one another. They are the who, what, when, where, and why, the small recurrent dramas of everyday life, played on the stages of home, school, community, and workplace: the father and daughter collaborating to find lost shoes, the preschooler recounting a folk tale with sensitive questioning by an adult, the child playing a board game through the help of a patient brother, the Navajo girl assisting her mother's weaving and eventually becoming a master weaver herself. These are activity settings.

Like all institutions, schools are comprised of activity settings: The classroom, the playground, the cafeteria, the nurse's office, and the auditorium evoke images of place and event. These shared memories reflect school activity settings that have been as stable as a rock and have been the locus for activities whose persistance has been a source of dismay to succeeding generations of reformers. To secure change requires that the school's activity settings be understood and altered so they will give rise to the desired assistance of performance.

One criterion for activity settings is that they allow for a maximum of assistance in the performance of the tasks at hand. They must be designed to allow teachers to assist children through the zone of proximal development toward the goal of developing higher order mental processes. These settings engage children in goal-oriented activities in which the teacher can participate as an assistor or coparticipant as the need arises. The principal purpose of these settings is to assist the child through the stages of the zone of proximal development to full independent mastery of the subject at hand.

When teachers are engaged with their students in this way, they are aware of the students' ever-changing relationships to the subject matter. They can assist because, while the learning process is alive and unfolding, they see and feel the child's progression through the zone, as well as the stumbles and errors that call for support. Schools must be reorganized to allow more activity settings with fewer children, more interaction, more conversation, and more joint activity. In our own work, we have made more liberal use of small-group student-directed activities, which leave the teacher free to participate in joint activity and instructional conversation with one or more of the groups, either rotating in a formal way, or "floating" in the classroom, responding to observed needs of children for assistance.

WHY DOES THE RECITATION SCRIPT PERSIST?

The absence of assisted performance in schools is all the more remarkable in light of studies that have revealed that assisting interactions take place regularly in everyday, unreflective child rearing. Why is it that this adult-child pattern—no doubt a product of historical, evolutionary processes—is so seldom observed in the very setting where it would seem most appropriate, that is, the classroom? Such interactions can be found in every society, in the introduction of children to any task. But this basic method of human socialization has not generally diffused into schools. Why?

There are two basic reasons. First, there are too many children for each teacher. To provide assistance in the ZPD, the assistor must be in close touch with the learner's relationship to the task. Sensitive and accurate assistance that challenges

but does not dismay the learner cannot be done in the absence of information. Opportunities to acquire this knowledge—conditions in which the teacher can be sufficiently aware of the child's actual, in-flight performing—are simply not available in classrooms that are organized, equipped, and staffed in the typical American pattern. Even if there is time to assess each child's ZPD for each task, still more time is needed—for interaction, for conversation, for joint activities among teacher and children. Occasionally, now and through history, these opportunities have existed: at the classical Greek academies, at Oxford and Cambridge, in the individual tutorial, in private American schools with classes of fewer than seven pupils. But all involve a pupil-teacher ratio that is unrealistic for current educational budgets, so public education is not likely to reorganize into classrooms of seven pupils each.

This does not make the case hopeless. Emerging instructional practices do offer some hope of increased opportunities for assisted performance: the increased use of small groups; the maintenance of a positive classroom atmosphere, which increases the independent task involvement of students; new materials and technology with which students can interact independent of the teacher; and systems of small-group classroom organization that allow for a sharply increased rate of assisted performance by teachers and peers.

However, even when instructional practices allow for increased use of assisted performance, it will not necessarily appear as a regular feature of a teacher's activity. It will not appear even in those teachers who are from homes and communities where, outside of school, such interactions are commonplace. It will not necessarily appear from teachers who themselves provide assisted performance for their own children. Even with the benefits of modern instructional practice there is still too large a gap between the conditions of home and school. This is the second reason that assisted performance has not diffused into the schools: Most parents do not need to be trained to assist performance; most teachers do.

By training we mean that teachers cannot rely on lay skills that are sufficient for parental socialization of offspring. Lay or parental skills are a foundation, but they are not enough. Teachers need a more elaborate set of skills in assistance, and they need to be conscious of their application.

Teachers need to learn good pedagogical practices. They must learn professional skills of assisting performance, and learn to apply them at a level far beyond that required in private life (Moll, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Also, they must master the subject matter they are to teach, an accomplishment too rare in teacher training programs.

The acquisition of pedagogical skills requires training and development experiences that few teachers encounter: opportunities to observe effective practitioners of assisted performance and opportunities to practice nascent skills, to receive video and audio feedback, and to have the gentle, competent coaching of a skilled consultant. Teachers themselves must have their performance assisted if they are to acquire the ability to assist the performance of their students.

Yet the recitation script persists in schools. Principals treat teachers according to their own recitation script—assignments are given and assessments are made. Superintendents assign and assess principals. School boards assign and assess superintendents. Professors of education assign and assess preservice teachers. No one is really teaching anyone, not through the authentic teaching of the instructional conversation. Is it any wonder that teachers assign and assess pupils?

In any school organization, one of the duties of each member should be to assist the performance of the person in the next subordinate position: The superintendent should assist the principal, the principal should assist the teacher, and the teacher should assist the pupil. The central responsibility of the teaching organization should be to assist the performance of each member. This assistance, with its accompanying cognitive and behavioral development, is the justifying goal of the school, and all other duties should be in its service.

What this definition of teaching implies is the need for schools to be different kinds of places than they are now. Schools must be organized to provide time and resources to assist teacher performance, so that teachers acquire the skills and knowledge needed to truly teach. Teachers must have sufficient autonomy, authority, and warrant from the school system to organize activity settings that will allow them to assist the performance of one another. This involves having the authority and support to organize their own contacts, to spend the time necessary to do their work, and to enlist the assistance of others when it is needed. It means the school must provide resources of equipment, space, and encouragement, and—most important—must treat this undertaking as something of vital importance. This would truly be a school system organized to assist the performance of all its members.

Will the school reform movement of the 1990s provide for true teaching in the classroom and in professional development programs? It is too soon to judge, but we can predict that reform will depend on changing the idea of school. The idea of the reciting school that has been passed down by our grandparents, and lives in the memories of each of our elementary school days, is no fair vision to guide us. The reciting school did not teach well a century ago, and will not teach well tomorrow. How can we escape the control of our common image of what school is? There is only one way. We must each work to change school culture so that it more reliably assists the performance of all.

NOTE

This report was adapted from Tharp & Gallimore (1988) and Tharp & Gallimore (1989).

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